

Editorial

March 31, 2010

The way many government documents are written, we can forgive the Americans who simply give up before finishing reading them.

That's why we believe the "plain writing" measure, sponsored by U.S. Rep. Bruce Braley, D-Iowa, received such overwhelming support in the House, which approved the bill 386-33 last week. The Senate must still act on the bill.

The legislation would require government to write documents, such as tax forms, in easy-to-understand, simple language.

"There is no reason why the federal government can't write these forms and other public documents in a way we can all understand," Braley said.

We hear you loud and clear, Mr. Braley.

It could reasonably be argued that a government that offers up confusing, hard-to-digest communications to its citizens is simply trying to bamboozle them.

Approval seems like a no-brainer.

However, we also realize that a similar bill, sponsored by Braley, was passed by the House in 2008, but died in the Senate. We don't want to see this bill stalled again.

John Mikelson, an adviser to hundreds of veterans at the University of Iowa, was featured in an Associated Press story in 2008 that delved into Braley's "Plain Language in Government Communications Act."

Mikelson has to make sense of the many benefit forms that end up on his desk.

"Unless you are an attorney, it's very difficult to understand what it is you're looking at," he said.

That's one of Braley's ins on the issue. He's an attorney by trade. He was practicing law in 1983 when the Iowa Supreme Court adopted easy-to-understand wording for jury instructions, and he developed an ongoing interest.

The bill could end up affecting the everyday lives of Americans across the nation, easing the frustrations of dealings with Medicare and Medicaid, veteran's benefits, Social Security, and the Internal Revenue Service. The government's apparent usurping of health care administration should be another big reason why this bill needs to be passed.

Why stand in the way of such logic?

"I'm going to keep pushing to pass the Plain Language bill into law, so American taxpayers can more easily work with and understand their government," Braley said back in 2008.

He's still pushing. And the concept is even longer past due.

